

BAPTISM ACCORDING TO PAUL

RESEARCH PAPER

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## INTRODUCTION

Paul does not make many explicit references to baptism in the letters that are recorded in the New Testament. That this may imply baptism to be unimportant to Paul is either an over exaggeration or naivety. Although it is true that his references to baptism are few in number, and that a systematic development of the act is lacking, its importance to him cannot be estimated by the number of times it is referred to in his letters. It must be realized that the act of baptism was a common practice in the church and since the church was in its infancy, the many problems that are attached to the ordinance today were not prevalent at that time. Also, the letters of Paul were written for specific purposes, to answer questions that had arisen in the local churches or to meet particular needs of the early Christians. His letters consisted of words of encouragement, rebuke, explanation, challenge and faith, and it is interesting to note that in all of the explanation and definitions he provides for the early church, never once do they imply that the church has asked for the purpose of baptism.

If the Corinthians had maintained the deeper spirit of fellowship in the Lord's Supper, Paul may have never found reason to make the discourse that is recorded in I Corinthians 11. If the Corinthians had never been bothered about a doctrine of the resurrection, Paul may have never stated his conviction about life after death. Therefore, to argue that baptism was not important to Paul because he seldom mentions it in his letters, is to overlook, quite naively, an act that had a spiritual impetus to his faith, message and mission. Flemington states that "the passages most vital for

our knowledge of Pauline theology are available for us today, humanly speaking, because of the failures and shortcomings and imperfect beliefs of certain first-century Christians."<sup>1</sup>

It must also be remembered that Paul was writing to Christians, persons who had already repented and been baptized into the fellowship of the church. If one were to seek Paul's concept of repentance in his letters, the natural conclusion would be that he did not have a strong conviction about repentance since he used the noun just three times and the verb only once. Yet, it would be absurd to say that Paul did not believe in repentance. Likewise, his concept of baptism cannot be lightly dismissed.

## I. ROMANS 6:1-11

It seems natural to begin with those passages which Beasley-Murray calls " . . . the most extensive exposition of baptism Paul has given, . . . (Romans 6:1 ff)"

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? By no means! We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein? Or are you ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, so that we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he that has died is justified from sin. But if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dies no more; death has no more dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died to sin once: but the life that he lives, he lives to God. Even so reckon you yourselves also to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

What is implied in these passages? Is it an analogy with eschatological implications? Is it an act in which the believer experiences a mystical death and resurrection to parallel that of Christ? Or, is it an ethical parallel of dying to sin and rising to a new life?

Translation difficulty arises at the very beginning in verse 4. "We were buried with him through baptism to death." If, on one hand, the last phrase of this passage belongs to the preceding noun in verse 3, the translation would be understood to mean a baptism for death. However, if the phrase is related to the verb, the meaning has more depth, and according to Sanday and Headlam, can be translated, "Through baptism we were buried with Him into that death of His."<sup>3</sup> Beasley-Murray contends that such a construc-

tion as this implies "participation in the death of Christ . . . "4 Regardless of what may be assumed, it seems reasonable that Paul believed immersion indicated more than just symbolism. C. H. Dodd says that "Paul does not indeed draw out the suggestion of the symbolism, but it lies near the surface. The whole sacrament is an act by which the believer enters into all that Christ did . . . "5 Beasley-Murray agrees with this interpretation with the supposition that "the kerygma gives this significance to baptism; its whole meaning is derived from Christ and His redemption--it is the kerygma in action, and if the action suitably bodies forth the content of the kerygma, so much the clearer is its speech."6

The symbolism re-enacts the experience of Christ, in that the believer is dipped into the water; he dies with Christ. He is then immersed; signifying the burial with Christ. The believer then emerges from the water, symbolizing the raising of Christ from the dead. With this surface symbolism is the existential experience of the believer who, through this re-enactment, becomes directly involved with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

However, such theological interpretations from the very beginning tend to overemphasize the existential dying and rising with Christ, and de-emphasize the point which Paul was trying to make. The first two verses, it must be remembered, imply that questions have been raised based upon the problem of morality, and the relation of faith and grace. He has tried to answer the question in chapter three, but realizing the possible abstractiveness of his doctrine, tries to put it into terms which laymen could understand. He answers the question by saying simply that because we are Christians, we have died to sin; "as far as sin is concerned, we are dead."7 Now in order to clarify his statement, he goes on to use an illustration that is familiar to his readers.

It has already been stated that Paul was writing to those who had already repented and been baptized into the fellowship of the church. It can be assumed that the early Christians were aware that baptism was into Christ Jesus. Paul was appealing to a practice and experience that was common in the life of the church.

Scholars agree that there are some parallels between the language of Paul and that of some of the Hellenistic oriental cults. It is possible that the act of baptism, as an initiatory rite and sacrament, had adopted part of the terminology of the mystery cults, such as the union of the believer with his god through a participation of an act which mystically paralleled the death, resurrection and divinity of the god. It can be assumed that Paul was familiar with the various religious beliefs and terminology, but whether his doctrines were derived primarily from them would be a hazardous conjecture.

His message as a whole was based on an eschatological hope, and it is only logical that his conviction concerning baptism would carry this element. "St. Paul's teaching about baptism cannot be understood save in an eschatological framework."<sup>8</sup> With this eschatological setting exists a problem which needs explanation, for although the Age to Come has, in one sense, already been consummated, it is too clear that the present age, that of sin and death, still exists. For Paul, " . . . the end has come, but it has not yet fully come; Christ has come bringing an end to the old age, yet he is still to come to bring about the consummation of the new."<sup>9</sup> The ultimate "resurrection and renewal of creation"<sup>10</sup> is still the hope of the future. "It follows that baptism is the gateway not to heaven, or to the fully 'realized' kingdom of God, but to a life which is related both to the present age, . . . and to the Age to Come, . . . "<sup>11</sup>



Following his assertion that Christians have died to sin, he uses the practice of baptism as a symbolic illustration of this point. "For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection" (Romans 6:5). Here again the eschatological implication is presented. Nygren refutes the symbolic use and refers to it as an "utter misinterpretation . . . For, according to Paul, in baptism we have to do with realities, not merely with sybolical representations. That which baptism symbolized also actually happens, and precisely through baptism."<sup>12</sup> Yet, it is clear that Nygren himself refers to the act as symbolizing something which "happens". This is precisely what Paul is referring to. What has happened in the life of the Christian is that in his commitment to Christ in faith, he has died to sin, but Paul does not state explicitly that this experience occurs at baptism. Paul's own experience came before his baptism when Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus.

The symbolism persists in the phrase "united in the likeness", in the image, or, as Barrett suggests, as "imitation".<sup>13</sup> Baptism is an imitation of the experience of Christ, with the analogy of being buried and raised as Christ was resurrected from the dead. It must be noted, however, that Paul refers to the future in the second clause, "we shall be . . . " Whether he purposely intended to use this alteration cannot be definitely stated. It has been asserted that Paul, while having strong convictions about the new life and the coming age, is still aware of the existence of the present age. He cannot say that once an individual becomes a Christian, he will never sin again. He realized himself that "For the good which I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I practice" (Romans 7:19). But, "in principle we are already in the new sphere of life; we shall be actually so in the future."<sup>14</sup>



Up to this point, the only fact that has been established is that "the Christian existence is rooted in a death and resurrection dependent upon Christ."<sup>15</sup> Man has definitely passed into a new order of life. This leads Paul to define the significance of the death that is experienced by the Christians. " . . . our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, so that we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he that has died is justified from sin" (Romans 6:6, 7). Barrett says that "The essential substance of this conviction is clear: death with Christ is an ethical experience, affecting the relation between man and sin."<sup>16</sup> Death for Paul "was the most unmistakable token of the sinful condition of mankind: it was sin that reigned the reign of death" (verse 21).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the symbolic death in baptism represented or imitated the ethical death of sin.

Yet, at the same time, participation in baptism unites one in the eschatological event. If baptism leads man into the death and resurrection, it automatically brings him into the event, which breaks the power of sin. The old self, which was in union with Adam, was crucified with Christ in order that the sin dominated body might be abolished. The result was the raising of the new self, the self united with Christ, which frees man from the bondage of slavery and sin. " . . . for he that has died is justified from sin" (verse 7). Thus, the man who dies is acquitted, cleared. His point is that sin has no power over the dead man, and, since Christ is dead, the man who has died in Christ is freed from sin's power.

One important note must be added. Baptism itself does not effect death. Paul would have mentioned this before. It is faith that effects death. That leaves the Christian not fully alive, for the ultimate resurrected life is to be consummated in the future. "Baptism 'death' accordingly

is a step towards the putting out of action of this sin-dominated aspect or element of humanity."<sup>18</sup> Two possible interpretations of the literal translation can be pointed out.

(i) 'Justify' may have its usual forensic meaning: death pays all debts. (ii) 'Justify' means 'to free from sin (actually)'. . . . It is not, however, right to distinguish sharply between these alternatives. The second is suggested by vv. 6 and 10: but there follows immediately v. 11 (consider yourselves dead). Thus (i) is true absolutely--the man who has died with Christ by faith has been justified; and (ii) ought to be in process of realization.<sup>19</sup>

The eschatological event has happened and will be completed. It is the beginning of the end. Man participates in the death and resurrection of Christ through faith. Therefore, death (as related to faith) is the once-for-all event which changes the whole of humanity.

Having defined baptismal death, Paul moves to its spiritual result, for just as death made possible the resurrection of Jesus, so death to sin leads to life.

But if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dies no more; death has no more dominion over him (verses 8, 9).

The eschatological implication is stated here in the future tense. Christ in His resurrection has initiated the new age. And it should be noted in verse 9 that the resurrection of Christ is introduced by "we know", in contrast to "we believe" in reference to "we shall live". Barrett concludes from this difference that Paul is saying that the "life of the Christian with Christ can be experienced and recognized only by faith; it is not capable of direct observation."<sup>20</sup> This, of course, is what Paul consistently speaks about in the first few chapters. With the initiation of the new age in the resurrection of Christ, those who have become united in the fellowship anticipate it by faith.

The crucial point of Paul's argument comes in verses 10 and 11, for even now, the question raised in verse 1 has not yet been answered. Paul has yet to show that man, "having secured entrance into the deathless order, may not go on sinning."<sup>21</sup>

For the death that he died, he died to sin once: but the life that he lives, he lives to God. Even so reckon you yourselves also to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (verses 10 and 11).

The power to escape the dominion of death means that there is also the power to overcome the dominion of sin. Dodd contends that verse 11 can be understood only if Paul's conviction of the "life and death of Jesus in relation to the condition of the world . . ." <sup>22</sup> is developed. Simply stated, his conviction is that man has become a slave to sin, as implied in verses 6 and 7. To Paul, "sin is not basically separate moral missteps; but sin is a power under whose bondage man lives."<sup>23</sup> The result of sin is death. "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57). Christ died to sin and was raised from the dead by the "glory of the Father" (verse 4). He was tempted as all men yet overcame sin's attempt at dominion and "stooped in His obedience even to die" (Philippians 2:8). The death of Jesus, as a result of his obedience, was not the victory of sin over man; it was the once-for-all victory of God over sin. Formerly, death had been the condemnation and judgment of man's sin, but now in the once-for-all act, Christ condemned sin in the flesh.

This leads automatically to the personal relationship as expressed in verse 11. As Christians, we have shared in Christ's death to sin. Therefore, " . . . reckon you yourselves also to be dead to sin, . . . " The word reckon is the same as that used in 4:3 to denote God's reckoning of righteousness to Abraham. "Christians are no more visibly dead and risen than Abraham was visibly righteous. Outwardly they appear as other men; but in Christ

Jesus they are newly related to God."<sup>24</sup> This relationship is based upon spiritual freedom that is the result of faith. "This implies that the Christian is free from Both the bondage of sin and from the guilt of sin."<sup>25</sup> Paul is making it evident that when he speaks of the Christian being "free from sin," he does not imply that the individual lives in a heaven of his own that is detached from worldly circumstances, and that the Christian will no longer face the temptations of sin that have enslaved him in the past. Paul was aware of his own weaknesses to be impractical. He sees life as a constant tension between two forces; that of righteousness and unrighteousness (verse 12). Nygren's analogy to illustrate this passage is as well done as Paul's use of baptism to clarify his point.

Formerly his the Christian's outpost was situated in enemy territory where death was in power. But now it has been captured and included in life's domain. Formerly he was the slave of sin, but now through Christ he is "free from sin."<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the Christian has been "brought from death to life." The Christian lives "in Christ". But this does not make the Christian unattached from life's circumstances. For even as he lives "in Christ," and is a member of the body of Christ (the fellowship of the church community), he is still in the world that is dominated by sin; he is still a part of the "old fallen humanity."<sup>27</sup> Because of this complicated situation, Paul admonishes the Roman Christians, "Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey the lusts . . . " (verse 12).

Formerly slaves of sin, they had become obedient to the 'standard of teaching' delivered to them at baptism, and thereby become 'slaves of righteousness'--their direction of life had been changed; they were under new ownership and owed no allegiance to their former way of existence.<sup>28</sup>

In this exchange of ownership, Paul believes that the old self, the man of the old existence, dies, when the Christian responds in faith. The new self comes into being so that Paul is able to say, ". . . the life I

now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God" (Galatians 2:20).

Baptism, as it appears in Romans 6 must be seen in context with both the preceding chapters and those that follow. It has already been noted in the beginning of this interpretation that theological interpretations from the very beginning tend to overemphasize the mystical dying and rising with Christ and overshadow the point that Paul was trying to make. Without relating these passages to those which surround it, one can easily draw out of the eleven verses what seemingly would be Paul's fundamental doctrine of baptism. But seen in context, it becomes more difficult to appraise its importance.

Although chapter six seems to begin a new topic, it is connected with the preceding chapter. Paul's statements which close the chapter<sup>29</sup> raises the question of morality and the relation of faith and grace. This leads him to put forth the question, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?", and then follow with an illustration that can simply picture for them what he has been trying to say. Formerly, he had talked about life in two ages; the life of Adam through which sin reigned and which resulted in death; and the life of Christ, through which came the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness. "So then as through one trespass the judgment came to all men to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness the free gift came to all men to justification of life" (5:18). Even as sin reigns in death, so grace reigns through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ.

In order to keep his readers from misunderstanding the relation of grace, Paul tries to define the incompatibility of sin and grace. In other words, if one truly understands grace, sin cannot be tolerated. To illustrate, he introduces the symbolism of baptism. As a necessary requirement, baptism is not important in Paul's thought. Paul states emphatically in his



letter to the Corinthians, "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel;" . . . (I Corinthians 1:17) Here, also, it is not discussed as a doctrine. Rather, he was speaking of the unity of the church and presupposes that they were baptized in Christ. This positive statement is also brought out in Galatians 3:27, "For as many of you as were baptized in Christ did put on Christ."

In relation to Paul's discourse on faith, it seems logical that the symbolism is clearly related to ethics. A moral cleansing would not seem strong enough in this context, since the opening question itself suggests that after man is freed by faith, he still continues in sin. A man washes continually throughout life to remove dirt from his person. Thus, the symbolism of the death, burial and resurrection in the action of baptism is a much stronger and relevant illustration for his point of argument. To "walk in newness of life" as symbolized by the resurrection carries with it a strong ethical connotation.

There is strong support for the contention that the death and resurrection of baptism has a sacramental connotation. But, as Dodd points out, "If Paul had held the view that the sacrament in itself, as a rite . . . automatically conferred the new life, he could have said, sans phrase, 'You are dead to sin and alive to God.'<sup>30</sup> If sacrament is defined as an outward sign in which God works uniquely, Paul's use of the action tends to contradict this interpretation, for if baptism was so important as a necessary sacrament, why does he wait until the sixth chapter to mention it, and then only briefly? He has already contended in the first three chapters that justification, salvation and faith brings man into a right relationship with God. Bultmann asserts that Paul opposes

✓ . . . a purely sacramental understanding of baptism as the means by which one achieves assurance of a future life. He does so by

showing that the life conferred by baptism must prove itself in the present by its freedom from the power of sin: . . . "so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ" (verse 11).<sup>31</sup>

Because Paul was realist enough to recognize man's inability to be sinless (as expressed in verse 11), it seems naive to assume that new life is the result of the act of baptism. This would support the thesis that the passage is used only as a point of argument concerning the problem of ethics.

Before a definite conclusion is drawn, one must consider Paul's concept of baptism from an over-all interpretation, taking into consideration his references to the subject in the other epistles. In this way, it is possible to look at the subject from a broader standpoint, and therefore, resist the temptation to draw a fundamental conclusion from one letter or reference.



## II. CORINTHIANS 1:12-17

Now I mean this, that each one of you say, I am of Paul; and, I of Appollos; and, I of Cephas; and, I of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, save Crispus and Gaius, lest any man should say that you were baptized into my name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I do not remember whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not in the wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made vain.

While Paul was at Ephesus, he received news of divisions in the church at Corinth, and this letter is his protest against strife in the church. We find from the very first section of the letter that he is "condemning all who would put men where Christ alone should stand."<sup>32</sup> His protest is in the form of an appeal for the Corinthians to give up their quarreling which has resulted in division.

The opening verse of the Scripture quoted above is self-explanatory as it parallels the division that is so pronounced in the modern church, such as "I belong to the Disciples;" "I belong to the Baptist;" "I belong to the Methodist," etc. This follows the pattern of the early mystery cults where a convert looked upon the priest who had performed the initiatory rite as his spiritual father. The implication is best summed up in the words of Flemington who says that Paul was making clear "the absurdity that he had died on the cross for them, that his name had been pronounced over them in the solemn moment of baptism. He goes on to record how thankful he is that, very few at Corinth had been baptized by him (much less baptized into his name)."<sup>33</sup> A baptism into the name of Paul would be for the purpose of becoming his disciples, and Paul protests against this reasoning.

Paul's statement, "I thank God that I baptized none of you," has been one of controversy among students of baptism, and yet, the statement as seen in context defies controversy. Paul does not minimize the significance of baptism. Rather, he expresses his relief that because he did not perform the baptismal services for those in Corinth (except a few), they could not set him up as Lord. Following the pattern of the mystery cults, any baptismal claim that would make one a disciple of Paul would automatically set him in the place of the Kurios.

Most scholars agree that Paul had a firm conviction that he was called to preach the gospel. The use of the conjunction in verse 17 seems to justify this interpretation: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel: . . . " This conviction is also expressed in his letter to the Romans when he writes: " . . . and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher"? (10:14)

It must be concluded that Paul felt compelled to preach the gospel rather than to baptize. Because Paul sees each Christian as an individual member of the Body of Christ, each individual has to respond in faith according to his own particular ability. He mentions later in this same letter that "God has set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, . . . (12:28) So to interpret this passage as a "depreciation of the value of baptism"<sup>34</sup> is to misinterpret and abuse the underlying meaning. Flemington concludes, " . . . it is just because he [Paul] had so high a sense of what baptism meant that he regarded with such abhorrence its debasement by Corinthian partisanship."<sup>35</sup>

### III. I CORINTHIANS 12:12-14

For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member but many.

Paul is still referring to the disunity of the church. The divisions went farther than the problem of who performed the baptismal rites. There were many in the church who claimed possession of certain spiritual gifts such as the power to speak with tongues, prophesy or the ability to heal. They were proud of their special gifts and this tended to widen the chasm that existed in the church. Paul's protest here is in the familiar analogy of the body with its many members. For them, the community in which they lived as believers in Christ, was the Body. When they were baptized, they became members of that Body. Here is Paul's ability to use relevant material to illustrate a point.

Because of Paul's analogy, this writer favors the interpretation of Best, when he writes:

The baptism of I Cor. 12:12 . . . is not water baptism but baptism in the Spirit. Water baptism is the sign and seal of this latter baptism--just as in Rom. 6:1-4, water baptism does not effect our death and resurrection with Christ, which took place upon the cross, but is the sign and seal of it to us. And for Paul the reception of the Spirit by the believer is connected with faith.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, if the body of Christ is interpreted as the community of believers, it is possible to accept also Beasley-Murray's observations regarding the "social concept of incorporation of the baptized . . . into the Body of Christ."<sup>37</sup>

(i) The believer is baptized 'to one Body'; not so as to form the Body but to participate in it, to be added to it. The Body exists before the believer is baptized; through grace he is incorporated into it by the Spirit. (ii) The believer is baptized 'to one Body' because he is baptized 'to Christ', not vice versa.<sup>38</sup>

The conclusion is that baptism, as a rite practiced by the church and recognized by Paul as having eschatological implications, was the act of social incorporation into the church, which he defines as the Body of Christ. It is the sign and seal of the believer's faith to participate in both the social and spiritual Body of Christ. As a recognized practice in the early church, this external symbol of unity did away with social, racial and spiritual barriers. From that time, they were to consider themselves equal members with varying gifts and abilities. When Paul says "For by one Spirit," he is implying that Christ is not divided (as he also argues in 1:12-17), neither should the living Body be divided. His use of baptism is in reference to an accepted practice, the initial act of the believer, in becoming a member of the fellowship.

#### IV. GALATIANS 3:26-28

For you are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus.

This passage climaxes a chapter in which Paul, as he does in his letter to Rome, refutes conformity to the law as the only rightful claim to becoming a son of Abraham. He makes it clear that Abraham's heirs are "men of faith". This is probably the most vigorous and vehement letter to flow from the pen of Paul. It is a rejection of the claim that the Christians must practice certain aspects of Jewish law, such as circumcision and the celebration of religious observances. The danger of acknowledging such rituals would result in "the necessity of obeying all the rest of the Jewish law, and will reduce the religious life of the Galatians to the tedious observance of countless religious forms."<sup>39</sup> "By no means!" says Paul, for even in the case of Abraham, long before the establishment of the law, faith was that which pleased God. It is faith which establishes the sonship relationship with God. By faith the Christian shares the sonship of Christ--he is in Christ because he has put on Christ.

That Christ was put on at baptism, as is indicated in verse 27, was natural for Paul, for the act symbolically represented the end of the old existence which he describes in Romans as the age of Adam, and began the new existence as a new creation, the new man in Christ. This was symbolically enacted in the early baptism rite by entering the water nude. Both the Jews and Hellenistic mystery cults practiced the ritual which ended with the con-

vert coming up out of the water and putting on a new robe which represented the new life or symbolized the deity. The robe "was supposed to endow the initiate with the character, dignity, and power of his god."<sup>40</sup>

In the context of this chapter, baptism was that act when the convert gave up the old existence and superficial traditions which were required, and, in faith, dedicated himself to God through Jesus Christ. From the time of baptism, the individual is to take the character of Christ and make it the basis for living. Through baptism, the individual entered upon the Koinonia of Christ.

All men stand equal in their relationship with God because of this fellowship of Christ in which the believer becomes a participant. The idea that the Gentile must become a Jew before he can become Christian is absurd. He has stated in Romans that " . . . there is no respect of persons with God" (2:11), and indicates as much in his letter to the Corinthians. That which equalizes men before God and gains for them the relationship of "son" is not adherence to external observances and religious requirements, such as circumcision, but faith. Christian freedom and equality is grounded on a right relationship with God. This relationship can only be established by faith in Jesus Christ.



## V. COLOSSIANS 2:9-13

For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and in him, who is the head of all principality and power, you are made full; in whom you were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, and in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, he made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.

Although there is some question about the authorship of this letter to the Colossians, a brief glance at its reference to baptism will note in some respects a parallel with the Roman passages concerning baptism. It is referred to as the dramatic re-enactment or symbolic action of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The practical conclusion is that the new moral life is an extension of the spirit of the resurrected Christ. It is interesting to note the use of circumcision in this passage. In verse 13, death is defined as the condition of man who is still under the domination of sin (as do the Roman passages) and refers to it as the "uncircumcision of the flesh." The "circumcision made without hands" refers to the Christian who has already responded in faith to God. This spiritual circumcision is described again as the circumcision of Christ, with Christ effecting the response.

The reference to baptism does not imply the act itself, but rather the experience represented in the act. It seems that the experience which is symbolized in baptism is thought to be a mystical participation in the death and burial of Christ, which parallels the thought of Romans. There is one basic difference, however. Whereas the Christian's participation in the resurrection of Christ as interpreted by Paul in writing to the Romans is with



an eschatological expectation, here the eschatological event is already realized. If the Colossian letter is authentically Pauline, this indicates a definite change in Paul's thinking in that there is

. . . a lessening of his absorption in the future consummation and a deepening of his appreciation of the benefits which Christians have already realized in Christ. . . . This change of emphasis might well be hastened by the controversy with a part which taught that the work of Christ needed to be supplemented by angelic powers.<sup>41</sup>

A parallelism with Romans is again recognized in that Paul makes it clear that the spiritual transition which the Christian experiences is made effective through faith in the working of God. Working, as it appears here, conveys the thought that God's power is active in the Christian. "Believing that God raised Christ from the dead, we believe that the same life-giving power is exercised with us."<sup>42</sup>

Beasley-Murray contends that the Christians at Colossae do not stand in "need of submission to Jewish ordinances . . . least of all to circumcision, since in Christ they have undergone a more radical circumcision than that to which their detractors would persuade them: they have been baptized into the circumcision of Christ on the cross (vv. 11-12)."<sup>43</sup>

Beare qualifies this by saying that "Paul is not glorifying one external rite in order to depreciate another . . ."<sup>44</sup> The spiritual circumcision is the spiritual experience that is represented in baptism.

## CONCLUSION

Five summarizing thoughts emerge from the preceding interpretations of Paul's references to baptism.

(1) The early church believed that baptism held the mystical connotation of participation in the death of Christ. This concept was prevalent in nearly all of the prominent religious groups of the first century.

(2) It was the symbolic expression of that participation, with the entrance into, the immersion, and rising from the water parallel with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

(3) Baptism had eschatological implications. By participating in the ritual, the Christian became a part of the event which had begun with Christ and would be consummated with His return. Paul's concept was that Christ had put an end to the old life of sin and death, but the ultimate consummation of the new life was to come—it was the hope of the future.

(4) Faith is the impetus that gives baptism the participation, symbolic and eschatological interpretations. Only in faith does the rite have meaning. Baptism is not valid without faith.

(5) Paul would oppose baptism as a requirement for fellowship and membership in the church.

Paul would not have been able to accept baptism as just an initiatory rite into the fellowship of believers. It can be reasonably assumed that, as a Jew, circumcision would have served this purpose. Yet, Paul argues (a) against the necessity of such a rite (Acts 15), and (b) against its continuance (Romans 2:25, 28), and (c) refers to it as a yoke (Acts 15).

It seems clear that in all of the references considered, Paul was not presenting a doctrine of the act, but merely using the accepted practice of the church to illustrate a point. And, one must realize that the first four thoughts indicated above were suppositions already established in church thought concerning the rite of baptism.

To be consistent, one would have to say that Paul opposed any external rite as a requirement into the fellowship of the church; this is indicated in his letter to the Galatians. The impetus of the Christian life is faith. Nowhere does he call for baptism as an approach to God or refer to it as a sacrament. He constantly proclaims faith as that which establishes the right relationship with God. Man is not justified by baptism; rather, man is "justified by faith . . . " (Romans 3:28)

Therefore, God will "justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith" (Romans 3:30). Paul could just as well say today, with the conflict of baptism in the church, that God "will justify the baptized by faith and the unbaptized through faith."

To conclude, one point can be made with certainty; it is not circumcision or baptism that puts sin to death, but man's response of faith. As a result, it seems logical that Paul would oppose baptism as a requirement into the fellowship of Christ.

#### FOOTNOTES

1 William F. Flewington, The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism, (London, SPCK, 1957) p. 52.

2 George R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament, (London, Macmillan, 1962) p. 126.

3 William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, The Epistle to the Romans, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1900) p. 157.

4 Beasley-Murray, op. cit., p. 133.

5 Charles H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (New York, Harper, 1932) p. 87.

6 Beasley-Murray, op. cit., p. 133.

7 Charles K. Barrett, The Epistle to the Romans (London, Black, 1957) p. 121.

8 Flewington, op. cit., p. 70.

9 William Baird, Paul's Message and Mission (New York, Abingdon, 1960) p. 154.

10 Barrett, op. cit., p. 122.

11 Ibid.

12 Anders Nygren, Commentary on Romans, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen, (Philadelphia, Muhlenberg, 1949) p. 233.

13 Barrett, op. cit., p. 124.

14 Dodd, op. cit., p. 89.

15 Barrett, op. cit., p. 124.

16 Ibid.

17 Dodd, op. cit., p. 89.

18 Barrett, op. cit., p. 125.

19 Ibid.

20 Barrett, op. cit., p. 126.

21 Dodd, op. cit., p. 89.

22 Ibid.

23 Nygren, op. cit., p. 252.

24 Barrett, op. cit., p. 126.

25 Baird, op. cit., p. 153.

26 Nygren, op. cit., p. 246.

27 Ibid., p. 247.

28 Beasley-Murray, op. cit., p. 288.

29 And the law came in besides, that the trespass might abound; but where sin abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly: that, as sin reigned in death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 5:20-21).

30 Dodd, op. cit., p. 92.

31 Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York, Scribner, 1951) p. 333.

32 Clarence T. Craig, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians", The Interpreter's Bible, X (New York, Abingdon, 1951) p. 7.

33 Flemington, op. cit., p. 54.

34 Beasley-Murray, op. cit., p. 181.

35 Flemington, op. cit., p. 54.

36 Ernest Best, One Body in Christ (London, SPCK, 1955) p. 73.

37 Beasley-Murray, op. cit., p. 170.

38 Ibid.

39 Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Story of the New Testament (Chicago, University Press, 1952) p. 10.

40 Raymond T. Stamm, "The Epistle to the Galatians", The Interpreter's Bible, X (New York, Abingdon, 1951) p. 518.

41 Francis W. Beare, "The Epistle to the Colossians", The Interpreter's Bible, XI (New York, Abingdon, 1951) p. 197.

42 Beare, op. cit., p. 198.

43 Beasley-Murray, op. cit., p. 152.

44 Beare, op. cit., p. 197.

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